

Nez Perce language

Nez Perce, also spelled **Nez Percé** or called **Nimipuutímt** (alternatively spelled Nimiipuutímt, Niimiipuutímt, or Niimi'ipuutímt), is a Sahaptian language related to the several dialects of Sahaptin (note the spellings *-ian* vs. *-in*). Nez Perce comes from the French phrase *nez percé*, "pierced nose"; however, Nez Perce, who call themselves *Nimiipuu*, meaning "the people", did not pierce their noses.^[4] This misnomer may have occurred as a result of confusion on the part of the French, as it was surrounding tribes who did so.^[4]

The Sahaptian sub-family is one of the branches of the Plateau Penutian family (which, in turn, may be related to a larger Penutian grouping). It is spoken by the Nez Perce people of the Northwestern United States.

Nez Perce is a highly endangered language. While sources differ on the exact number of fluent speakers, it is almost definitely under 100. The Nez Perce tribe is endeavoring to reintroduce the language into native usage through a language revitalization program, but (as of 2015) the future of the Nez Perce language is far from assured.^[5]

The grammar of Nez Perce has been described in a grammar (Aoki 1973) and a dictionary (Aoki 1994) with two dissertations (Rude 1985; Crook 1999).

Nez Perce	
<i>Niimiipuutímt</i>	
Native to	United States
Region	Idaho
Ethnicity	610 Nez Perce people (2000 census) ^[1]
Native speakers	20 (2007) ^[2]
Language family	Plateau Penutian <ul style="list-style-type: none">Sahaptian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Nez Perce
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	nez
Glottolog	nezp1238 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/nezp1238) ^[3]

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Phonology

The phonology of Nez Perce includes vowel harmony (which was mentioned in Noam Chomsky & Morris Halle's *The Sound Pattern of English*), as well as a complex stress system described by Crook (1999).

Consonants



Pre-contact
distribution of
Plateau Penutian
languages

Consonant phonemes of Nez Perce^[6]

		Bilabial	Alveolar		Palatal	Velar		Uvular		Glottal
			central	lateral		plain	lab.	plain	lab.	
Plosive	plain	p	t			k	(k ^w)	q	(q ^w)	ʔ
	ejective	pʼ	tʼ			kʼ	(kʼ ^w)	qʼ	(qʼ ^w)	
Fricative	plain		s	ʃ	(ʃ)	x		χ		h
	affricate		ts	tʃʼ						
	glottalized		tsʼ							
Sonorant	plain	m	n	l	j		w			
	glottalized	mʼ	nʼ	lʼ	jʼ		wʼ			

The sounds k^w, kʼ^w, q^w, qʼ^w and ʃ only occur in the Downriver dialect.^[6]

Vowels

Vowel phonemes of Nez Perce^[6]

	Front	Central	Back
High	i i:		u u:
Mid			o o:
Low	æ æ:	a a:	

Stress is marked with an acute accent (á, é, í, ó, ú).

Grammar

As in many other indigenous languages of the Americas, a Nez Perce verb can have the meaning of an entire sentence in English. (This manner of providing a great deal of information in one word is called polysynthesis.) Verbal affixes provide information about the person and number of the subject and object, as well as tense and aspect (e.g. whether or not an action has been completed).



Nez Perce chiefs

word: *ʔaʷlíwaa ʔinpqawtaca*

morphemes: ʔew - ʔilíw - wee - ʔinipí - qaw - téé - ce

gloss: 1/2-3OBJ - fire - fly - grab - straight.through - go.away - IMPERF.PRES.SG

translation: 'I go to scoop him up in the fire' (Cash Cash 2004:24)

word: *hitʷalapáyna*

morphemes: hi - tiʷele - pááy - e

gloss: 3SUBJ - in.rain - come - PAST

translation: 'He arrived in the rain' (Aoki 1979)

Case

In Nez Perce, the subject of a sentence, and the object when there is one, can each be marked for grammatical case, an affix that shows the function of the word (compare to English *he* vs. *him* vs. *his*). Nez Perce employs a three-way case-marking strategy: a transitive subject, a transitive object, and an intransitive subject are each marked differently. Nez Perce is thus an example of the very rare type of tripartite languages (see morphosyntactic alignment).

Because of this case marking, the word order can be quite free. A specific word order tells the hearer what is new information (*focus*) versus old information (*topic*), but it does not mark the subject and the object (in English, word order is fixed — subject–verb–object).

Nouns in Nez Perce are marked based on how they relate to the transitivity of the verb. Subjects in a sentence with a transitive verb take the ergative suffix *-nim*, objects in a sentence with a transitive verb take the accusative suffix *-ne*, and subjects in sentences with an intransitive verb don't take a suffix. For example:

Ergative suffix -nim

ʔáʔaas-nim hitwekúxce

grizzly-ergative he.is.chasing

‘Grizzly is chasing me’

Accusative suffix -ne (here subject to vowel harmony, resulting in surface form -na)

ʔóykalo-m titóoqan-m páaqaʔancix ʔáʔaas-na

all-ergative people-ergative they.respect.him grizzly-accusative

‘All people respect Grizzly’

Intransitive subject

ʔáʔaac hiwéhyem

grizzly has.come

‘Grizzly has come’ (Mithun 1999)

This system of marking allows for flexible word order in Nez Perce:

Verb–subject–object word order

kii péé-ten’we-m-e qíiw-ne ’iceyéeye-nm

this 3 → 3-talk-csl-past old.man-obj coyote-erg

‘Now the coyote talked to the old man’

Subject–verb–object word order

Kaa háatya-nm páa-’nahna-m-a ’iceyéeye-ne

and wind-erg 3 → 3-carry-csl-past coyote- obj

‘And the wind carried coyote here’

Subject–object–verb word order

Kawó’ kii háama-pim ’áayato-na péé-’nehhén-e

then this husband-erg woman-obj 3 → 3-take.away- past

‘Now then the husband took the woman away’ (Rude 1992).

References

1. Nez Perce language (<https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/nez/>) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. "UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in danger" (http://www.unesco.org/culture/language_s-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-824.html). *www.unesco.org*. Retrieved 2018-05-17.
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Language learning materials

Dictionaries and vocabulary

- Aoki, Haruo. (1994). *Nez Perce dictionary*. University of California publications in linguistics (Vol. 112). Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN 0-520-09763-7.
- "Nez Perce Literature and vocabulary" (<http://www.indigenouspeople.net/nezperce.htm>). *Indigenous Peoples' Literature*. Retrieved 2013-09-21.
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Texts and courses

- "Nimipuutimt Calendar and Nez Perce Tribe Language Program" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130923082702/http://www.nezperce.org/Official/languageprogram.htm>). Archived from the original (<http://www.nezperce.org/Official/languageprogram.htm>) on 2013-09-23. Retrieved 2013-09-21.
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External links

- "Haruo Aoki Papers on the Nez Perce Language" (<http://cla.berkeley.edu/collection/4>). *California Language Archive*. Retrieved 2013-09-22.
 - Nez Perce language videos (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL94hr8ur6xv5MZ-L3r-ki2YkSJqcNNAmc>), YouTube
 - Phillip Cash Cash website (<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/>) (Nez Perce researcher)
 - Nez Perce sounds (http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/sounds/nezperce_sounds.html)
 - Joseph Red Thunder: Speech of August 6, 1989 at the Big Hole National Battlefield Commemorating our Nez Perce Ancestors (<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/bighole/redthunder.html>) (has audio)
 - Hinmatóowyalah̓tq'it: Speech of 1877 as retold by Jonah Hayes (ca. 1907) (http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/chief_joseph.mov) (.mov)
 - Fox narrative animation (<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/fox.swf>) (.swf)
 - Nez Perce Verb Morphology (<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/Nez%20Perce%20Verb%20Morphology.pdf>) (.pdf)
 - wéeyekweʔnipse 'to sing one's spirit song': Performance and metaphor in Nez Perce spirit-singing (https://web.archive.org/web/20060903202835/http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/seize_with_the_mouth.pdf) (.pdf)
 - T̓imnákn̓i Tímat (Writing from the Heart): Sahaptin Discourse and Text in the Speaker Writing of X̓ílux̓in (http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cashcash/Timnakni_Timat.pdf) (.pdf)
 - A map of American languages (TITUS project) (<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/didact/karten/amer/amerim.htm>)
 - Nez Percé (<http://live/search/detailedlanguagerecord?ethnocode=nez>) at the Rosetta Project
 - OLAC resources in and about the Nez Perce language (<http://www.language-archives.org/language/nez>)
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